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Graham Sutherland 68.
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GRAHAM

SUTHERLAND

MARCH 10—28, 1953

CURT VALENTIN GALLERY

32 EAST 57 STREET · NEW YORK

The Origins of the Land
1951. 14'3" x 12'2"

Owned by the
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[Not in exhibition]

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GRAHAM SUTHERLAND

BY HERBERT READ

Henri Michaux remarks, in his book of travels, that the Chinese consider "la racine comme plus 'nature' que le tronc . . . Tout ce qui est tortueux dans la nature lui est une douce caresse." This is not an oriental eccentricity; it is typical of an aesthetic that finds more power and significance in the generation of life than in its florescence. There is vitality in both root and branch, but the element that searches the earth, extending its form in opposition to hard particles of rock, by that very struggle seems to win a superior grace. By contrast, how banal seem to be those regular or symmetrical forms that have matured in the unresistant air.

This image comes to mind when we contemplate the paintings of Graham Sutherland. Not that he is an orientalist, either in style or philosophy; but his work shows the same desire to reveal the directions taken by hidden germinal forces, to record the unexpected shapes assumed by life in its blind proliferation. The painter's eye is a

revealing, not merely a recording, organ. But the revelation is also a transformation, for the artist is not a mere discoverer (that would be to confuse his job with the scientist's), but an interpreter. His forms are aesthetic, which means that he uses the power he takes from living things to give vitality to the creatures of his imagination.

Such abstract formulas of criticism are invented only when the artist has finished his work of creation. He himself is guided by instinct. His eye, searching the solid darkness where life germinates, is suddenly aware of phosphorescent shapes, dim analogues of roots, of larvae, of knots, joints, scarred bark, succulent fibres; of leaves, too, and branching twigs; of thorns and flowers—rarely of men or animals, for they do not have the rooting, tentative quality of vegetation. An artist like Sutherland is not, is essentially *not, a humanist. (His portraits assimilate the human being to thorny, spicular forms of life, as though a first frosted sheath of crystallization had already glazed the skin.) Sutherland is a landscapist, like so many of his English predecessors. This English obsession, which began more than two hundred years ago as a simple topographical interest, scientific in its motivation, became under the influence of the Romantic poets a transcendental philosophy of nature. Landscape-painting with Turner is already a symbolic representation of cosmic reality—of the Spirit of Nature. But such a romantic revelation is always coloured by the mood of the revealer. Turner was the least philosophical of men, but he had a naively direct mystical vision which belongs to the same* Weltanschauung *as Wordsworth's and Coleridge's, which it is not merely fanciful to associate with Schelling or Novalis. Sutherland, a hundred years later, has entered another philosophical climate, and though his relations to a Heidegger or a Sartre may be as remote as Turner's was to Schelling or Novalis, the growing fearsomeness of the symbols reflects the now prevailing cosmic anxiety. These colours, to a philosophical temperament, may be*

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a shade too acid; these lines and form too hesitant or too agitated; but a painter whose sensibility is acutely aware of the metaphysical mood of the age, no less than of the ocular vision of the scene, must transform the fragments of his perception into a coherent language of the

spirit. To do less is to be false to the destiny of the artist, which is always to rend the veil of Maya, reckless of what the action may reveal.

Sutherland's naturism is opposed to the humanism of Moore, but these two examples of contemporary philosophical art are properly regarded as complementary; together they represent England's distinctive contribution to the art of the twentieth century. The position they occupy is not exclusive, even of other artists in England. If we assume that these two figures have a representative function at the present moment, we are at the same time conscious that they stand, not only for a general spirit of the age, but also for many other artists who speak the same language, with accents that may be different but not necessarily less significant. Nevertheless this exhibition has suddenly revealed the magnitude and consistency of Sutherland's work, and given it a more than regional significance. Sutherland is possibly the first English painter since Turner who has been bold enough to take up an independent position as an artist, and to maintain it with conviction in the presence of his European contemporaries.

[Preface for the catalogue of the retrospective exhibition at the *Musée National d'Art Moderne* in Paris]

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Thoughts on Painting

BY GRAHAM SUTHERLAND

Abridged and revised from a talk made on the Third Programme of the B.B.C., September, 1952.

I think it is bad for a painter to try to explain his work. He is using up energy which could be better employed in painting, or he is tempted to rationalize the intuitive workings of his mind. Yet he can, at times, give a clue; but this is all he can do.

Painting, of course, should explain itself; but, for many reasons, the particular qualities of life of certain kinds of contemporary painting are not immediately apprehended.

When Aeschylus tells us that 'Dust is mud's thirsty sister,' we immediately know something of the nature of dust. By personifying dust and mud, we apprehend, through words of the utmost economy, the essence of both. So, too, in painting, by a deliberate method, a paraphrase, perhaps, one can underline and embody in one's material the very essence of the sensation of one's subject and shed a succinct light on the nature of things and emotions.

When one regards Picasso's gnashing "Weeping Woman," it is interesting to recall that Aeschylus tells us that *'grief bites.'*

The process of transfusion is so mysterious that it is difficult to be precise. In my own case, I can only hint at it.

The first reaction, of course, is through the eye. Perhaps one goes for a walk. There is everything around one; but one reacts to certain things only, as if in response to some internal need of the nerves. The reaction

varies. I have at times noticed a certain juxtaposition of forms at the side of a road, and, on passing the same place next week, they are gone. It was only at the original moment of seeing that they had significance for me.

I sometimes make notes. However brief these may be, this practice is useful to me; I can take my subject home with me, as it were. If I react fully—with no preconceptions—it is as if I had never seen my subject before. In the studio, I remember. It may be from the sensations of an hour ago, or years, and I react afresh. The images dissolve, objects loose their normal environment and relationship. Then things seem to be drawn together and redefined in the mind's eye—in a new life and mould—there has been a substitution—a change. But I hold this to be valid only in so far as the process of digestion has preserved in the substance of my material — paint and canvas — the sensation of the original presence in its new and permanent form.

This is as close as I can get to the process. One always risks that danger, to which I have referred before, of rationalizing the workings of the mind, which are often irrational, and certainly mysterious.

One question which people will always pursue is that of obscurity. Why is so much contemporary art obscure? Modern painting is, of course, more obscure than most art of the past. But if one duty of painting is to explain the essence of things and emotions, may it not be sometimes wise for the spectator simply to accept? Do we need an explanation of the flight of a bird or the flash of light-

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ning? Do we need to be told the meaning of a rose? Coleridge said that poetry gives most pleasure when generally and not perfectly understood. These lines of Blake are possibly obscure:—

My spectre round me night and day
Like a wild beast guards my way;
My emanation far within
Weeps incessantly for my sin.

—but it may be argued that their mysterious music is actually enhanced by that obscurity.

Today we are faced with new problems of interpretation of phenomena and ideas, previously ignored. What then, it may be asked, happens to the belief that art is communication? Does a painter cease to communicate if people cannot identify that which he has depicted? Does a form have to be namable before it can affect? Could not the contrary also be true? If we meet a new experience or a new taste should we turn from them with distaste because they are unlike the things we do know? Might we not, in fact, be *stimulated* because of their very newness and difference?

For myself I believe that a new vision must be grafted on reality—that the mysteriously intangible must be made immediate and tangible.

People ask about my 'Standing Forms.' What do they mean? They do not, of course, *mean* anything. The forms are based on principles of organic growth (with which I have always been preoccupied). To me they are monuments and presences. But why use these forms instead of human figures? Because, at the moment, I find it necessary to catch the taste—the quality—the essence of the presence of the human figure: (the mysterious immediacy of a figure standing in a room—or against a hedge—in its shadow—its awareness, its regard—as if one had never seen it before) by a substitution I find, at the moment, that I can make these qualities more real to myself in this way. It happens that I find these organic forms the best for my purpose. They themselves are emotionally modified from their natural prototype. They

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give me a sense of the shock of surprise which direct evocation could not do. In these pictures also, I am trying to return these forms, after drastic rearrangement and emotional and formal modification, to the field of purely visual response—to throw them back, as it were, into the original cradle of impact.

I think that today the time has come to do more than to be content to put a line round our reactions. By that I mean that the tendency has been to modify the forms of reality emotionally and intellectually—to keep them, in fact, non-optical—or rather optical only in the sense that observation and reaction have produced a kind of visual shorthand which intellectually and mentally—even sensibly—refers one back to their prototype in life.

I feel that now it may be possible to enlarge the field of painting by setting our emotional paraphrases of reality—they themselves having been realized more optically within the ambience of optical reality. That I feel this may be one reason for my recent experiments in portraiture. It is possible that I feel the need to narrow the gap between my "monuments" and the real human animal.

The painter is a kind of blotting paper; he soaks up impressions; he is inevitably very much part of the world. He cannot, therefore, avoid soaking up the implications of the apparent chaos of twentieth century civilization. Subconsciously tragic pictures may be painted: and without, necessarily, having a tragic subject. Maybe one can only "matter in darkness—spirit sore." But one has in one's hand the instruments of transformation and redemption.

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CATALOGUE

OILS

1 *Path between Plantations*
1950. 35¾ x 20"

2 *Standing Stone Form*
1950. 12 x 10"

3 *Stone Form*
1951. 10½ x 7½"

4 *Three Standing Forms in a Garden*
1951. 52½ x 45½"

5 *Head*
1951. 24 x 20"

6 *Cynocéphale*
1952. 52 x 23¾"

7 *Standing Forms*
1952. 71¼ x 55¾"

8 *Form against Foliage*
1952. 66½ x 33½"

9 *Vine Pergola*
1952. 18 x 36"

10 *Head*
1952. 36 x 28"

11 *Landscape with Stones in Grasses*
1952. 18¾ x 36¼"

12 *Forms against Reeds*
1952. 24 x 20"

13 *Two Forms in a Terraced Landscape*
1952. 20¼ x 36¾"

14 *Poised Form*
1953. 41 x 20¼"

GOUACHES

15 *Standing Forms against a Palisade*
1950. 17¾ x 14"

16 *Two Stone Forms against a Hill*
1951. 11 x 19¼"

17 *Barren Landscape with Rocks*
1951. 13⅛ x 9⅝"

18 *Standing Form against Red Ground*
1951. 16½ x 7¼"

19 *Study for Artichoke and Rock*
1951. 13½ x 9¾"

20 *Rock Forms in Grasses*
1951. 13 x 9¾"

21 *Study for "The Origins of the Land"*
1951. 31½ x 28¼"

22 *Birds*
1952. 22½ x 21½"

23 *Standing Form against a Wall*
1952. 22¼ x 9¼"

24 *Predatory Form*
1952. 22¼ x 7"

25 *Landscape with Rocks*
1952. 22½ x 14¾"

26 *Form with Raised Arms*
1952. 22½ x 15"

27 *Monuments against a Landscape*
1952. 8 x 21¼"

28 *Rocks in a Landscape*
1952. 7¼ x 7¾"

29 *Study St. Jean*
1952. 9 x 7¼"

Paintings by Graham Sutherland are owned by the following museums in the United States: Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo; University of Nebraska Art Galleries, Lincoln; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Santa Barbara Museum of Art; San Francisco Museum of Art; Phillips Gallery, Washington, D. C.

Comprehensive retrospective exhibitions have been shown at the Biennale in Venice (1952), at the Musée National de l'Art Moderne, Paris (1952), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1953).

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